

# Introduction to Machine Learning

## Entropy and Optimal Code Length



### Learning goals

- Know that source coding is about encoding messages efficiently
- Know how to compute the average length of a code
- Know that the entropy of the source distribution is the lower bound for the average code length

0 0 0 1 0 0 1 1 encoded string

00 01 00 11 codewords

dog cat dog bird source symbols

# SOURCE CODING

- There is an interesting connection between entropy and a subfield of information theory known as **source coding**.
- Abstractly, a source is any system or process that generates messages or information.
- A code is simply a way to represent the message so that it can be stored or transmitted over a communication channel (such as radio or fiber-optic cables).
- For example, one could use binary strings (0's and 1's) to encode messages.
- Because it may be expensive to transmit or store information, an important problem addressed by source coding is efficient coding schemes of minimal average length.



# SOURCE CODING / 2

- Formally, given a discrete alphabet/dictionary  $X$  of message symbols, a **binary code** is a mapping from symbols in  $X$  to a set of codewords of binary strings.
- For example, if our dictionary only consists of the words "dog", "cat", "fish" and "bird", each word can be encoded as a binary string of length 2 : "dog"  $\rightarrow$  **00**, "cat"  $\rightarrow$  **01**, "fish"  $\rightarrow$  **10** and "bird"  $\rightarrow$  **11**.
- For this code, a binary string can be decoded by replacing each successive pair of digits with the associated word.

0 0 0 1 0 0 1 1      encoded string

00 01 00 11      codewords

dog cat dog bird      source symbols

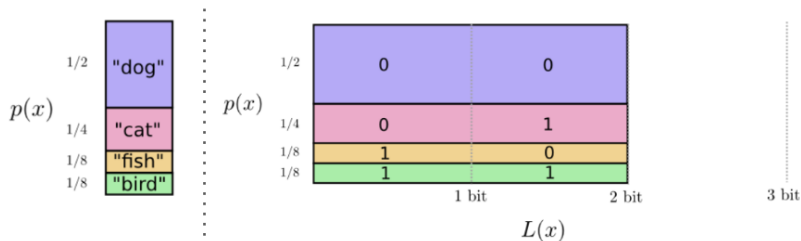
Credit: Chris Olah

Chris Olah (2015): Visual Information Theory. <http://colah.github.io/posts/2015-09-Visual-Information/>



## SOURCE CODING / 3

- Encoded messages are emitted by a source which can be modeled as a probability distribution over the message symbols in the dictionary.
- Let  $X$  be a random variable that represents a symbol from our data source and let  $p(x) = \mathbb{P}(X = x)$ , for symbol  $x$  in our dictionary.

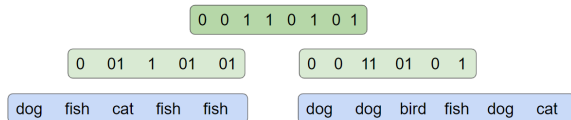


Credit: Chris Olah

- Length  $L(x)$  is simply number of bits in corresponding codeword. Here all codewords have length 2.
- Area of rectangles on the right reflect contributions to  $\mathbb{E}[L(X)]$

## SOURCE CODING / 4

- Maybe we can create better average-length coding schemes with **variable-length** codes by assigning shorter codes to more likely messages and longer one to less likely messages.
- However, this can be problematic because we want the receiver to be able to unambiguously decode the encoded string.
- Let us say the words in our dictionary are encoded in this way:  
"dog" → **0**, "cat" → **1**, "fish" → **01** and "bird" → **11**.
- In this case, the string 00110101 can be decoded in multiple ways.



- One way to make variable-length messages unambiguous is by ensuring that no codeword is a prefix (initial segment) of any other codeword. Such a code is known as a **prefix code**.



## SOURCE CODING / 5

- In general, the number of possible codewords grows exponentially in length  $L$ .
- For binary codes, there are two possible words of length one, four possible words of length two and  $2^L$  possible words of length  $L$ .

0	0	0
		1
	1	0
		1
1	0	0
		1
	1	0
		1
bit 1	bit 2	bit 3

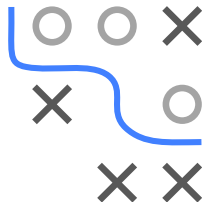
- In total, there are  $(2^{L+1} - 2)$  codewords of length  $\leq L$ .



## SOURCE CODING / 6

0	0	0
		1
	1	
1	0	0
		1
	1	0
		1
bit 1	bit 2	bit 3

$\left[ \frac{1}{2^L} = \frac{1}{4} \right]$

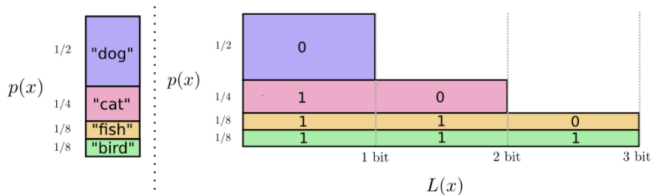


- Here, if the codeword **01** is assigned to a symbol, then **010** and **011** cannot be assigned to any other symbol because that would break the prefix property.
- If a codeword of length  $L$  is assigned to a symbol, then  $\frac{1}{2^L}$  of the possible codewords of length  $> L$  must be discarded.
- If some symbols are assigned short codewords, due to the prefix property, many marginally longer codewords cannot be assigned to other symbols.

# SOURCE CODING / 7

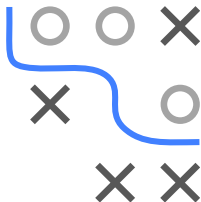
- An example of prefix code:

"dog"  $\rightarrow$  **0**, "cat"  $\rightarrow$  **10**, "fish"  $\rightarrow$  **110** and "bird"  $\rightarrow$  **111**.



- Here, the expected code length is :

$$\begin{aligned}\mathbb{E}[L(X)] &= \frac{1}{2} \cdot 1 + \frac{1}{4} \cdot 2 + \frac{1}{8} \cdot 3 + \frac{1}{8} \cdot 3 \\ &= -\frac{1}{2} \cdot \log_2 \left( \frac{1}{2} \right) - \frac{1}{4} \cdot \log_2 \left( \frac{1}{4} \right) - \frac{1}{8} \cdot \log_2 \left( \frac{1}{8} \right) - \frac{1}{8} \cdot \log_2 \left( \frac{1}{8} \right) \\ &= H(X) = \mathbf{1.75} \text{ bits. } (< 2 \text{ bits})\end{aligned}$$





## SOURCE CODING / 8

- Actually, this coding scheme is the most efficient way to store and transmit these messages. It is simply not possible to do better!
- In fact, Shannon's **source coding theorem** (or **noiseless coding theorem**) tells us that the optimal trade-off is made when the code length of a symbol with probability  $p$  is  $\log(1/p)$ .
- In other words, the entropy of the source distribution is the theoretical lower bound on the average code length.
- If it is any lower, some information will be distorted or lost.
- In practice, algorithms such as Huffman Coding can be used to find variable-length codes that are close (in terms of expected length) to the theoretical limit.

